NEW frontier

George Hinton checks out a luxury two-berth with space for one more, from Grimsby-based Auto-Trail

Vehicle supplied by the maker: Auto-Trail VR Ltd, Trigano House, Genesis Way, Europarc, Grimsby DN37 9TU. Call 01636 704201 or see auto-trail.co.uk

YOU MIGHT wonder why we are analysing another Auto-Trail so soon after January's Apache 725 test? Well, although it shares the same basic Fiat Ducato 40 Maxi underpinnings, the Savannah is another new layout that will appeal to a totally different market – well-heeled couples that might occasionally want to indulge a friend or grandchild with a holiday. However, travel seating could be a problem for three – more on that later.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

Although it's only a two-to-three berth, it's wider and eight inches longer than the six-berth Apache, despite which, it manages to be cramped in some internal areas. Equipment-wise, however, little is lacking. Once again, we have a chassis rated at four tonnes, though with full tanks and two gas cylinders, we found the unladen weight (with driver) to be 95kg above the maker's figure. The resultant user payload of 370kg (7.3cwt) should still be adequate for a couple plus the occasional addition though.

ON THE ROAD

The standard 2.3-litre 130bhp engine with six-speed gearbox gives quite good performance for such a large vehicle, pulling to 50mph from rest in around 17 seconds. On our cruise down from Grimsby it only just bettered 20mpg but we will give it the benefit of the doubt as it was fresh from the box and will undoubtedly improve to 22-23mpg once it has 10,000 miles behind it.

As expected after our Apache experience, ride quality is both superb and peaceful thanks to the rigid GRP-skinned body construction with 40mm insulated walls and excellent fit-out. Alloy wheels are fitted, with a steel full-sized spare behind the tailored rear cover. Our standard uphill reversing test at tickover speed was accomplished with no problems and the long-distance comfort of the Ducato cab is now legendary.

Forward visibility is fine and when reverse gear is selected, the 2.8in colour monitor in the dash radio/CD player switches on within five seconds, giving a close-up view behind, day or night, to supplement the excellent mirrors. Importantly, there are airbags for both driver and passenger, while externally there are orange side marker lights.

Any extra guests would have to provide their own transport, as there are only two seatbelts provided as standard, in the cab.

LIVING ABOARD

The electric step activates with the key fob central locking button, like the Apache, though pivoting rather than sliding out. It's subtly roomier than the Apache inside, as Frontiers get a wider 2.31m body than the 2.26m Apache, internal width being up 64mm at 2.17m.

It was a surprisingly retrograde step, however, to find no fewer than five keys supplied, even though the gas locker (2x15kg) has keyless entry from an internal handle. Keys were required for the water filler, secure spare wheel cover, folding roof ladder and the belly locker that also contains the 110Ah house battery and mains inlet socket. A rear external locker runs full-width under the wardrobe and is accessible from inside, and there are external hot-and-cold shower connection and gas barbecue points.

As we've come to expect from Auto-Trails, headroom is a pretty generous 6ft 6½in, except where you have to step up, losing five inches, to the rear bedroom. Décor is 'Acer' woodgrain on the walls and solid ply furniture, while a honey-beige tufted carpet covers the floor. The 'Finsbury' upholstery material is mainly flatweave with a velour feature, piped in soft faux leather.

The front layout comprises a short (36in) nearside sofa immediately left of the entrance door, with a wider one opposite, that can be simply pulled together to make the third occasional bed. A free-standing table, 37in x 23in, fits comfortably between and the six-inch cushions make comfortable dining chairs. More than two for dinner? The cab seats swivel, the second 55cm (21½in) circular table on a 'boom arm' tubular support serving the nearside seat comfortably.

To the right of the door is the large fridge-freezer, with table-storage cabinet attached, providing a useful narrow shelf on its top. Immediately opposite the door projects the island of the kitchen, with the round stainless sink nearest you and the cooker next to it, flanking the shower cubicle, which is up the step into the rear bedroom area.

The washroom with toilet is opposite on the nearside and the toilet door can be latched across the aisle, enclosing the rear bedroom area.

Returning to the forward saloon, the single roof locker on the nearside is fitted as a cocktail cabinet, while one of the two opposite lockers houses the Sargent power supply unit with its trip switches, the TV amplifier and the entertainment system controller with master switch. This lowline version has four further lockers above the cab, though the centre pair of doors cover a single undivided space. The no-cost highline option has a double bed here, but you would need a layout change if you wanted two extra belted travel seats, available as a half-dinette in place of the offside settee at modest cost.

Blown warm air heating comes from a 4kW gas/electric Truma combi boiler, located under the nearside rear bed, while a Heki 3 wind-up rooflight provides plenty of daylight and/or air as required.

An electronic panel above the doorway houses all electrical and heating controls, and all lighting is by power-saving LEDs.

KITCHEN

Can't fault the equipment level here, with both a full-size Spinflo Caprice III gas/electric hob, oven and grill, a Daewoo 700W microwave oven, plus Thetford's 150-litre fridge-freezer with stainless steel finish. Gas valves are in a shallow locker beneath. An Omnivent two-way fan extracts cooking vapours or pumps in outside air on a hot, sticky day, and there are three narrow, slide-out chrome storage baskets positioned behind their own door beneath the mixer tap.

The curved-door cupboard under the sink houses an unconventional fixed cutlery tray on its shelf with some storage beneath. There's the usual pan locker below the oven and two chrome racks in the roof locker for plates and bowls. One last storage area is the large tambour-door locker above the fridge-freezer.

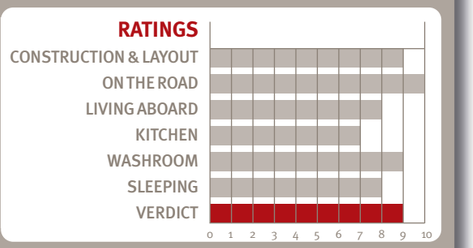
With a total length of just 1.12m (3ft 8in), working space is limited. The sink and cooker lids hardly count, as you >>

Three for dinner? No problem

Third occasional bed is a bonus

DID YOU KNOW? Auto-Trail's Arapaho won best Luxury Rear Lounge Coachbuilt at the 2010 MMM Awards

> "Ride quality is both superb and peaceful thanks to the rigid GRP skinned body"

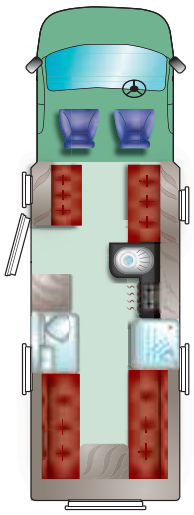


RRP	£51,742/£53,240 (inc Platinum (£599) and Media (£899) option packs)
Engine	2287cc Fiat/Iveco Multijet
Power	130bhp (95.5kW) at 3600rpm
Torque	236lb ft (320Nm) @ 2000-3000rpm
Options	3-litre 157bhp engine £1810; 3-litre plus Comfortmatic auto gearbox £3167
Transmission	6-speed manual,FWD
Overall length	7.60m (24ft 11in)
Internal length	6.02m (19ft 9in) from dash; 5.02m (16ft 5¼in) from behind cab
Overall width	2.72m (8ft 11in) inc mirrors
Overall height	3.03m (9ft 11in)
Max internal height	1.99m-1.87m (6ft 6⅛in-6ft 1⅛in)
Fuel/econ/tank	Diesel/20.2mpg/17.6gal (80 litres)
Kerbside weight	3635kg (71.5cwt) (inc driver, 90% fuel, 100% water)
MAW	4005kg (78.8cwt)
User payload	370kg (7.3cwt)
Berths	3
Travel seats	2 (4 opt)
NCC approved	Yes

Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: auto-trail.co.uk

Kitchen is small but well-equipped

Well-lit washroom



can't cook without access to both, although Auto-Trail has tried to ameliorate this by making a large cut-out in the sink cover, enabling you to draw and dispose of small amounts of water without too much mess. Okay once you have prepped everything perhaps. If you are worried about the carpet, the kitchen section alone can be removed.

The microwave is set perilously high above the sink area (base height 1.63m – 5ft 4in – above floor level), but does have a second LED striplight below it, so kitchen lighting is good, as well as economical.

There's also a gimmicky LED edge-lit glass splashguard to the edge of the worktop as well as LED under-edge lighting around the worktop periphery and a 13-Amp power outlet at the back of the worktop.

WASHROOM

There's a proper, lever-handled door to the heated, carpeted washroom. The 14in oval basin, in white acrylic, is semi-inset into a cabinet below a window which is squatter than that in the Apache, allowing a longer mirror above, the bottom edge being 4ft 6in above floor. The window is clear, so the blind has to be kept almost closed on site for privacy.

While the washroom has a transparent Mini Heki rooflight with night-blind, the separate shower opposite has an 11in five-way rooflight with insect mesh but no blind. You could therefore be awakened by early-morning sun in summer, as the only door to the shower is translucent acrylic. No separate heating in there either, but it does get warmed by the bedroom's outlets.

The one-piece acrylic shower has a double-fold door, a single rear drain and is three inches deeper than the Apache's at 61cm (24in). The chrome riser carries a slim pencil-type rub-clean shower-head that gives a good, economical spray controlled by single-lever mixer. Temperature remains stable and the pressure is fine. A small moulded shelf below the mixer is adequate for sample-size bottles of shower gel.

Lighting is good, with a 27-LED strip above the shower door and a similar one over the mirror next door. The flat-topped Thetford C250 toilet, fed from the main tank, gives an extra surface on which to rest things with lid closed, and there's storage at both high and low level.

SLEEPING

A dedicated rear bedroom with fixed twin beds means maximum convenience with minimum effort at bedtime. Six-inch mattresses give sumptuous comfort while the slatted supports have hinges, allowing them to be raked for comfortable reading or breakfast in bed – such luxury!

Bed lengths are 5ft 11in nearside and 6ft 1½in offside. Should this be uncomfortably short, there is the option of that 6ft 10in maxi-single up front, half of which is 48in wide. The taller sleeper is clearly presumed to be in charge, as the light switches are placed on that side of the wardrobe, though there are also individual LED reading lights.

The central rear wardrobe, with automatic light, has three large drawers beneath featuring positive catches, a night shelf in front and two further shelves each side. Roof lockers are provided in a mix of sizes: two on the nearside (one shelved) and three offside (two shelved).

A moulded panel is inset above the foot of the shorter bed, designed to take a flat-screen TV, with appropriate power/aerial sockets alongside. The general ambience is pleasing, with full, lined, eyeleted curtains running on chromed curtain rods to completely cover the pleated blinds if desired. The cab has Remis pleated blinds all round.

The excellent 4x35W entertainment system is linked to Radiomobile stereo speakers fitted above the bedheads. There's also a through-roof directional TV aerial.

VERDICT

Auto-Trail has long had a strong reputation, and this latest Savannah will do nothing to harm it. The only things we can criticise are the size of the kitchen and the less-than-standard UK domestic bed lengths, but there is always the long 'spare' bed as an option. The main question buyers have to ask themselves is: does this have sufficient advantages over the cheaper Apache range to justify spending another £8000 or so on it? ■